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Next 6 Page(s) In Document Denied

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Tale of intrigue swirls around 8 jailed Americans

Failed Ghana coup among allegations

San Jose Mercury News

In a tale of international intrigue that reads like a lost chapter from a best-seller, the plight of eight Americans sentenced last week to at least four years in a Brazilian prison has been explained variously as a CIA operation, an attempted coup, a plan to arm Brazilian insurgents and an effort to establish Mafia-run gambling resorts on the coast of Africa.

It may be some of those things; it may be none. Amid a storm of rumors, suspicions, accusations, charges and counter-charges, one of the few certainties about the "Nobistor affair" is that many of those involved — perhaps even most of them — say the others are liars.

During the past two weeks, several sources familiar with the case have described a plot strikingly similar to Frederick Forsyth's novel "The Dogs of War," in which a group of European mercenaries buy a ship, load it with weapons and steam for Africa, where they overthrow a government. The sources' account, which cannot be verified conclusively, contrasts sharply with accounts provided by the imprisoned men, their lawyer and even the Brazilian prosecutors.

Whether the plot is fact or fiction, the target the sources described is real: Ghana's ruler, Lt. Jerry Rawlings.

The results of the plot are equally real: The eight Americans were convicted Thursday of violating Brazilian contraband laws; U.S. federal agents have opened an investigation; the governments of Ghana, Brazil, Argentina and the United States want answers, and six tons of military supplies and weapons are lying unexplained in the hold of an oceangoing tugboat, the Nobistor, in Rio de Janeiro's Guanabara Bay.

Through their lawyer and family members in this country, the imprisoned Americans have maintained that they were acting merely as security guards, hired to protect a \$200,000 shipment of weapons bound by sea from Argentina to Africa. But the sources say the men were hired to overthrow Lieutenant Rawlings and install in his place Godfrey Osei, a Ghanaian dissident who escaped from prison in 1983 and who has lived in the United States since then.

The eight are self-described "soldier of fortune" John Dee Early; Timothy M. Carmody, a San Francisco State University graduate student; Frederick T. Verduin of Santa Rosa, Calif.; Robert E. Foti of New York City; Sheldon W. Ainsworth of Omaha, Neb.; Julio Rodriguez-Larrazabal and Steven Villa Sosa, both of Fayetteville, N.C., and Steven W. Hedrick.

Mr. Early, who described himself as the leader, was sentenced Thursday to five years in prison. The other men received four-year sentences.

The arms deal first came to light in March, when the Nobistor dropped anchor at a small port 20 miles east of Rio de Janeiro. Federal police searched the boat and found six tons of rifles, submachine guns, hand grenades, revolvers and ammunition.

After their arrest, the men said they had been hired by Mr. Osei and a shadowy Texas commodities broker named Ted Bishop to ferry the shipload of weapons from Buenos Aires, Argentina, to Ghana, ostensibly for the Ghanaian Defense Ministry. Later evidence indicated that Mr. Osei bought the weapons posing as a Defense Ministry official.

Mr. Bishop, the men said, could confirm the whole story, but they were unable to find him.

However, Mr. Bishop — interviewed last week by telephone from his home in Texas — told a different tale. He said that the Americans had been hired to assist Mr. Osei in overthrowing Lieutenant Rawlings' government and that he had warned them against participating as soon as he had found out. After the coup, Mr. Bishop said, the eight Americans were to be paid bonuses from Ghana's national treasury and from its diamond and gold mines.

Mr. Bishop's story could not be verified conclusively, and an associate of Mr. Osei's denied that bonuses were to be paid as Mr. Bishop described. But other parts of the tale have been confirmed by other sources.

Mr. Osei escaped from a Ghanaian prison after being convicted of participating in a 1983 attempt to topple the Rawlings government.

Mr. Bishop, 46, and other sources quoted Mr. Osei as saying the weapons were purchased with \$500,000 to \$750,000 borrowed from New York City organized crime figures. Mr. Osei said the gambling figures had been promised permission to build a gaming resort on Ghana's coast. Mr. Bishop and another source, who asked not to be identified, said Mr. Osei had three suitcases filled with cash to finance the deal.

"Godfrey told me he got it from the Mafia, and he was having to pay it back at 300 percent rates," Mr. Bishop said.

Mr. Osei, interviewed briefly by telephone, denied Mr. Bishop's allegation that gambling interests had financed the purchase of the weapons. "This is ridiculous," Mr. Osei said. "Ask him how did he get to know me."

Mr. Bishop had said earlier that he met Mr. Osei while working on a commodities deal with Mr. Osei's Hudson, N.Y., roommate. "That is a big lie," Mr. Osei said. "He, Ted, calls himself a CIA agent. Right? [Ask him] how he got to know me. He knows. He knows."

Mr. Osei declined to comment further, offering neither any explanation for his involvement in the case nor any denial that he had been plotting the overthrow of the Ghanaian government.

"The situation is a little dicey, you know," Mr. Osei said. "Maybe any-

THE BALTO. SUN
6/23/86

thing that I say would jeopardize my plans. So, in the future maybe I can give you my story."

Mr. Bishop denied ever having worked for the Central Intelligence Agency. The CIA has declined to confirm or deny its involvement in the affair.

Mr. Bishop said he arranged through a Buenos Aires broker for Mr. Osei to buy the weapons from Argentina's Fabricaciones Militares, the government arms factory, after Mr. Osei asked him for help. Mr. Osei, he said, promised to pay him for his help by granting him the marketing rights to part of Ghana's coffee and cocoa crops.

"We was going to pay fair market price for it but buy it directly from producers up in the hills and market it on the world market," Mr. Bishop said.

When they were hired by Mr. Osei in February, the Americans all believed they were to provide security for a legitimate arms deal, according to various sources. The men — there were nine at that point — assembled in Miami, were flown to Panama and then on to Buenos Aires, where they met Mr. Bishop and Mr. Osei.

"It was all first class," said one man who later backed out of the deal. "We stayed in nice hotels, the food was good."

Once in Buenos Aires, Mr. Bishop said, they waited for Mr. Osei to buy the weapons and lease a ship.

"Godfrey was taking them out to dinner, paying their booze bills," Mr. Bishop said. "Godfrey's head swelled up three sizes when he got his private army. They used to go out to dinner two by two, all strung out down the main street of Buenos Aires, with Godfrey at the head wearing his khakis with shoulder straps. In his own mind, he had already become a dictator general."

At that point, the sources said, all of the men had been led by Mr. Osei to believe that the operation was sanctioned in some way by the U.S. government.

"He was saying, 'It's OK with your government, there's not going to be any jeopardy,'" said one source, who claims to have helped to devise Mr. Osei's plans for assaulting Lieutenant Rawlings' stronghold.

In Buenos Aires — or aboard the Nobistor, depending on who tells the story — Mr. Osei revealed the full scope of his plan to the Americans. It called for attacking the government compound in Accra, freeing and arming prisoners in a nearby jail, overthrowing Lieutenant Rawlings and attacking a Libyan base 40 miles from Accra.

Then, according to Mr. Bishop, who said he learned of Mr. Osei's plans in Buenos Aires, they were to eliminate several of Mr. Osei's enemies. If they went through with the

coup, in addition to \$4,000 to \$10,000 each for ferrying the weapons to Ghana, Mr. Bishop said, they were to be paid in cash from Ghana's national treasury and diamonds and gold from its mines.

"When they got down there, Godfrey told them about it," said Mr. Bishop. "I heard it from John Early. He asked me about it, and I said, 'This is the first I heard about it, John. I don't even know what you guys are doing down here.'"

Mr. Bishop said another of the Americans asked him whether he worked for the CIA and whether the agency had given its tacit "sanction" to the operation. "He said, 'I thought you were the one recruiting, and you are CIA.' I said, 'You better get out of this deal. This is a bad deal.'"

Eight of the Americans ignored Mr. Bishop's advice, he said. Leaving behind a Tampa, Fla., private investigator named Scott Caldwell, the eight set forth on the Nobistor. At sea, they received an urgent radio message from Mr. Caldwell in Tampa. He warned the Americans that he had learned the arms deal wasn't sanctioned by the U.S. government.

"Bishop did not tell those men it was illegal, absolutely not," Mr. Caldwell said in a recent interview. "I still to this day have not figured out why anybody would hire that guy to do anything."

The Americans contend that they then forced the crew of the weapons-laden Nobistor to change its destination — from Ghana to South America. They were arrested March 14 in Itaipu, a small port 20 miles east of Rio. Federal police impounded the ship and confiscated the weapons. The trial began several weeks ago and ended with the guilty verdict Thursday.

The case came at a sensitive time in Brazil. An agrarian reform movement has provoked armed resistance by wealthy landowners opposed to distributing land to millions of poor peasants. Last week, Brazilian federal police seized hundreds of illegal weapons in a sweep of a northern region where the land disputes have been most violent.

Nobistor Prosecutor Juarez Tavares said Judge Julieta Lunz ruled that "it was too much of a coincidence that heavy-caliber weapons would appear in Brazil exactly at the time we are having such heated conflicts over land."

In addition, Brazil is on good terms with Ghana, which was equally certain the weapons were intended to arm Ghanaian dissidents.

In the United States, federal agents were drawn into the case last month when Mr. Caldwell and three other men confronted Mr. Bishop at the apartment complex he owns and manages in Farmersville, Texas, a town of 2,700 near Dallas.

In an angry exchange, the men

argued about Mr. Bishop's role in the weapons shipment, believing that he knew more about the deal than he was telling. Some of the men say Mr. Bishop has worked for the CIA in the past, an allegation Mr. Bishop denies.

Mr. Bishop eventually pulled a gun on Mr. Caldwell and ordered the men out of his apartment, according to Farmersville police. No charges were filed, but Farmersville Police Chief John Davidson said he turned the matter over to the U.S. Treasury's Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms.

Although it is not clear whether the ATF has jurisdiction over the legal issues in the case, a spokesman for the agency's Dallas bureau said it had opened an investigation.

Ordinarily, said a Dallas ATF agent who asked not to be identified, the ATF wouldn't look into a brawl in a small farming town.

"When we got involved, we found international gun runners," the agent said. "That's how we got involved." He said the agency's inquiry had only "scraped the surface" of the complicated deal.

Another source, who asked not to be identified, said he and two other men whom he wouldn't identify developed Mr. Osei's assault plan for the palace in Accra last October, but then backed out of the operation, sensing that Mr. Osei didn't have sufficient money to make it work.

"What Mr. Osei wanted to do was overthrow Jerry Rawlings and put himself in power," the source said. "I started on this in October of 1985."

The source said he was in Mr. Osei's apartment in the sprawling Le Frak complex in Queens, New York, when several Asian men arrived with three suitcases containing a large amount of cash. He said Mr. Osei later told him that the "Chinese Mafia" was financing the coup.

The combatants were to include 100 Europeans. Two commando assault groups were to hit the palace and government buildings while a headquarters group handled logistics.

The boat would meet with another ship off the Ivory Coast and then proceed to Ghana, where the men would go ashore and attack the capital. The source said he became suspicious when it was clear there would be no advance payment.

"Godfrey didn't want to pay anybody up front," the source said. "His thing was, when you hit the beach and assault the palace, you'll be free to go to the national treasury, the gold mines. [He said,] 'I will provide you with transportation.' I said, 'The hell with that.' No professional would get onto that. There's no guarantee he wouldn't put us up against a wall. Everybody else was saying, 'You got to take a chance. . . . This is when I backed out.'"

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